

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Old Rag Mountain/Weakley Hollow Access and Parking Development Project

Shenandoah National Park

Introduction

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates specific parking lot sites and configurations and trail locations in lieu of the current leased parking lot arrangement in support of hiking in the Old Rag area of the park. The fact that the leased lot is not immediately adjacent to the park results in pedestrian use of a state road and a public safety concern. Furthermore, the lease arrangement presents uncertainty regarding the future availability of this parking lot.

In response to these concerns, the NPS developed the following primary objectives for the project: (1) provide improved public safety; (2) minimize impacts to area landowners from visitation; (3) avoid damage to cultural and natural resources in and out of the park; (4) accommodate current levels of visitation; (5) create a positive experience for those entering the park from Madison County; and (6) provide an opportunity for partnerships that promote the interests of all partners while serving the visitors. In meeting objective 4, above, the NPS has sought to replace a 250 space leased parking lot with a permanent parking lot of similar or nearly the same capacity.

The NPS proposed a No Action alternative which would continue operation of the leased lot as long as the lease was renewed as well as four parking development alternatives that would be sited on a 6-acre tract owned by the Potomac Appalachian Trail club and formerly owned by a Mrs. Kestenbaum along State Route 600. Under formal agreement with Mrs. Kestenbaum, the eastern most acre of this tract would not be developed for five years (from December 2002) or until her death, whichever comes first. Three of the four development alternatives would require a future phase of construction on that reserved portion of the tract to achieve the fourth objective. Such development would be subject to funding availability and environmental compliance.

After completion of the EA and consideration of public comments the NPS identified the preferred alternative. Details of the NPS preferred alternative (referred to as Alternative D in the EA) include:

- Development of a gravel access road and a 125-vehicle gravel parking lot.
- Construction of a connector foot trail on the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) tract of land and on federal land between the parking lot and the Old Rag Ridge Trail.
- Construction of a connector trail between the parking lot and SR600 on the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club tract to allow access to the Nicholson Hollow Trail trailhead.

- Temporary use of the lower leased lot for overflow parking.
- Installation of a shed-style kiosk (~120 square feet in size) that would serve as a temporary public contact station. This would include use of self-contained vault toilets and/or portable toilets.
- Installation of water run-off settling and filtering structures adjacent to the limited areas where the access road or parking lot may be located closer than 50 feet from wetlands on the site. It should be noted that these would be very limited in number and size because this alternative specifically maximizes use of wetland buffers.

Alternative D achieves all of the project objectives except objective 4. This objective can be achieved through a second phase of construction during which a net of 90 additional parking spaces will be constructed.

Although not explicitly mentioned in the EA, the existing parking area and trailhead development located on parkland at the end of Route 600, would likely remain in place and in use. This small parking area may continue to be used as the primary parking area when demands for parking are low. It could also accommodate limited amounts of overflow parking on busy days. Although none of the trails served by this parking lot meet standards for those that are mobility impaired, limited access is possible in close proximity to the parking. Continued maintenance and operation of this parking area is prudent. Use of this parking lot would be subject to re-evaluation if impacts to neighbors result or other operational concerns arise.

The proposed developments are limited to actions in which the NPS has traditionally specialized including parking lot, trail, and trailhead development.

Alternatives Considered

Four alternatives were evaluated in the EA, in addition to the NPS preferred alternative. Briefly, those alternatives were:

Alternative A - No Action . This alternative represents the status quo and serves as a benchmark from which to measure adverse or beneficial impacts of the action alternatives. Under this alternative, the current lease arrangement would be perpetuated as long as the property is available for lease. The current agreement expires in 2007. Visitors would park at this leased lot and would walk 0.8 miles to the Old Rag Mountain trailhead. A temporary contact station would remain at the leased parking lot, as would rented portable toilets. Even though the No-Action Alternative directly affects the least wildlife habitat and vegetation acreage, it fails to achieve other objectives of the project.

Alternative B – Develop Parking for 225 Vehicles. This alternative would result in the largest possible parking lots (primary lot with 165 spaces/overflow lot with 60 spaces) on the PATC site. No further use of the leased lot would occur after construction. A new connector trail would be constructed between the primary lot and the Old Rag Ridge Trail. A temporary public contact

station would be located adjacent to the primary lot and portable or vault toilets would be provided. A short connector trail between the overflow lot and SR600 would be constructed to provide access to the Nicholson Hollow trailhead.

Alternative C – Develop a 165-Vehicle Parking Lot and Temporarily Continue Use of the Leased Lot on Peak Use Days. A moderately sized parking lot (165 spaces) would be constructed on the PATC site. The current lease property would be used to accommodate overflow on the heaviest days of use until an over flow lot on the PATC site is developed in the future. A new connector trail would be constructed between the primary lot and the Old Rag Ridge Trail. A temporary public contact station would be located adjacent to the primary lot and portable or vault toilets would be provided. A longer connector trail between the new lot and SR600 would be constructed to provide access to the Nicholson Hollow trailhead. This trail would be longer than the one proposed in Alternative B.

Alternative E – Develop Parking for 160 Vehicles. This alternative would result in smaller parking lots (primary lot with 125 spaces/overflow lot with 35 spaces) than Alternative B but they would have similar configurations. The current lease property would be used to accommodate overflow on the heaviest days of use until an over flow lot on the PATC site is developed in the future. A new connector trail would be constructed between the primary lot and the Old Rag Ridge Trail. A temporary public contact station would be located adjacent to the primary lot and portable or vault toilets would be provided. A short connector trail between the overflow lot and SR600 would be constructed to provide access to the Nicholson Hollow trailhead.

The primary long-term objective of this project is the replacement of the 250 car leased lot with a permanent parking arrangement. Alternative A does not meet this objective because it proposes continued use of the leased lot. Alternative C does not meet this objective because it proposes continued use of the leased lot on peak use days. Alternative C also has the potential for indirect impacts to wetlands on the site.

Alternative B most closely achieves the long-term objective but has been eliminated due to concern for direct and indirect impacts to wetlands and because it would result in facilities that are closer to adjacent landowners on the west side and may result in increased noise and other disturbances to park neighbors.

Alternative E has also been eliminated for the same reasons as Alternative B but has the additional shortcoming of not fully replacing the 250 car leased lot capacity.

As explained in the EA, six other alternatives were considered but rejected for various reasons.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The NPS preferred alternative was identified as the environmentally preferred alternative in the EA. Alternative D involves the least construction and ground disturbance of all the action alternatives. It also provides the largest buffer between the parking lot and wetlands on the site. The environmentally preferred alternative promotes the national environmental policy expressed in National Environmental Policy Act and is the alternative that results in the least damage to the biological and physical environment and best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources. Even though the No-Action Alternative directly affects the least wildlife habitat and vegetation acreage, it fails to achieve the objective of replacing the existing leased lot with a permanent solution and the objective of improved public safety.

Public Involvement

Public review of the EA was conducted from February 11, 2003 to March 28, 2003. Subsequently, public review periods were extended first to April 28, 2003 then to May 28, 2003. Twenty-two comments were received on the EA from twenty-six commentors. Most were letters and facsimiles but six were electronic mail messages.

Slightly fewer than half of the commentors suggested that the No Action alternative was their preferred alternative. The remainder suggested other alternatives, a variation of the alternatives in the EA, or did not make a suggestion. No clear patterns existed amongst this latter group of commentors, in terms of alternative selection, but it is evident that they all favored action.

The specific nature of the comments was wide ranging. Appendix A contains agency responses to those comments.

In addition to comments on the EA, the park received a copy of a petition dated September 15, 2002. The petition states "We want the Park Service to comply with the law, and not expand the Park beyond its existing boundaries with this proposed new parking lot." The proposed action does comply with the law and there is no plan, at this time, for the landowner, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, to donate land to the National Park Service thus expanding the boundary of the park.

Mitigation and Monitoring

The mitigation and monitoring measures listed in the EA as part of the action alternatives and assumed in the analysis of effects will be implemented as part of this decision. They deal with vegetation, water, wetlands, wildlife, visual and cultural resources, as well as visitor use and safety, and are attached as Appendix B of this document. This list of mitigation measures has been expanded beyond information that was provided in the EA. None of the additions to the list

materially change the nature of the project and all are intended to strengthen environmental protection measures that will be taken.

Significance Criteria and Consequences of the NPS Preferred Alternative

In accordance with regulations that implement the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the following criteria must be considered to determine whether or not a proposed action will have significant effects:

- The degree to which the action affects public health or safety
- Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas
- The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial
- The degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment is highly uncertain or involves unique or unknown risks
- The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures or objects listed on the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources
- The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical
- Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment
- The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration
- Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts

The Environmental Assessment provides a description of the impacts of the preferred alternative to the natural and cultural resources. These are summarized below.

While public and employee safety will be a concern during project implementation, mitigative measures will be taken to protect human health and safety. Full implementation of the project should improve public safety.

No wild and scenic rivers are at or near the project site. The project is not situated on park lands or prime farmlands.

Investigations were conducted to identify historic and cultural resources on the site. A survey and assessment of cultural resources on the site began in the winter of 2001. The survey included identification of architectural, cultural landscape, and historical components. Although several small-scale architectural features were identified (two spring boxes and stone mounds), these are

not considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. No significant cultural landscape features or historical or ethnographic associations were identified.

A Phase I and portions of a Phase II archaeological survey were undertaken to determine the extent of intact, undisturbed site areas. Approximately three acres of the six-acre tract were surveyed. This is where construction impacts may occur. Survey results have indicated that a majority of the surveyed area of the site has been repeatedly plowed and disturbed by other means in the past. One small area, however, has been identified as undisturbed and may potentially be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This is addressed in greater detail below.

Investigations were also conducted to identify ecological conditions on the site. Wetlands are present but the site is not regarded as unique or ecologically critical. The following natural resources impacts are anticipated.

Under Alternative D, 1.13 wooded acres would be cleared of all trees, shrubs, and herbaceous vegetation to accommodate the construction of the access road, the parking lot, and placement of the temporary public contact station and chemical toilets. Because a 50-foot vegetated buffer will be left in place between the development and the riparian community in most areas, no or very limited impact on water temperature is anticipated as a result of this tree and shrub removal. In addition, some shrubs and herbaceous vegetation will be removed from the connector trail corridors. Woody vegetation with stems greater than ½" in diameter will be avoided in trail siting. The maximum area involved in construction of the two trails will be about 0.8 miles long by 5 feet wide.

Similar areas will undergo disturbance of soils to allow grading for access road and parking lot construction. Generally 6-8" of topsoil would be removed. In some cases, up to 2 feet of topsoil will be removed to assure level driving surface construction and proper drainage. Removal of large rocks and boulders may be necessary. The trail will be sited to follow contours of the local terrain. Trail tread construction will involve removal of large rocks and leveling of the ground surface with no more than 6" of cut and fill. Approximately 20 waterbars or checkdams will be installed on the trails and special design/construction techniques will be used on the trails where they cross wetlands. This may entail some additional minor ground disturbance.

Some additional vehicular use of SR600 will occur between the leased lot and the new lot. Increases in emissions of volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxides, and carbon monoxide are anticipated to be negligible. Fugitive dust from the new parking lot and access road are also anticipated to be minor.

During dry to normal precipitation years, no impacts to water quality are anticipated. During very heavy rain events, some parking lot and driving surface run-off may enter adjacent streams causing scouring, soil and gravel loss, silt and sediment transport, and flooding. In the context of the entire Hughes River watershed, the contribution of run-off from this project will be minor. Infiltration of surface water from the parking lot into ground water may occur under extreme

conditions. In most cases, a clay loam layer that underlies the construction area should provide sufficient filtration of contaminants that may mobilize off of the parking area.

Trail development will occur adjacent to and, to a limited extent, in wetland areas. Mitigation measures used in trail design and construction, such as use of an elevated boardwalk, will minimize these impacts. Impacts should not result in any net loss of wetland function.

Vegetation removal, grading of the soil surface, and installation of the temporary public contact station will result in some loss of habitat for wildlife. Most wildlife can be expected to move to adjacent undisturbed areas. Subterranean invertebrates that occupy those areas that will be excavated and graded will probably be destroyed during construction.

Vehicular noise may increase somewhat between the current leased lot and the new parking lot along SR600 stemming from increased traffic on this road segment. This will probably be most noticeable on the heaviest public use days. Vehicular noise west of the new parking lot should decrease as visitors adjust to using the more accessible, new lot. Noise from visitors using the connector trails will increase over baseline conditions for those areas through which the trails pass. This increase will be offset by quieter conditions around the current trailhead for Old Rag. Noise from pedestrians on SR600 will decrease.

The presence of a parking facility and contact station near designated wilderness could be perceived to have impacts on the values of quiet and solitude in the wilderness. The National Park Service believes that addition of this parking lot and contact station will not add significant amounts of noise beyond that generated by existing uses, including another parking lot and trailhead. Both the existing leased lot and the new parking facility are approximately one-half mile from the wilderness boundary.

The wilderness value of wildland without permanent evidence of human presence will be slightly diminished by the construction of an additional 0.2 miles of trail in designated wilderness. However, this area of the park is classified as "Threshold Wilderness" within which trail construction and maintenance is anticipated per the park's Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan. The nature and intensity of visitor use in this area is not expected to change. Instead, hiking will shift from one location to another. Specific mitigation measures will be implemented (see Appendix B) to minimize the visual and environmental impacts of this trail.

There were no highly controversial environmental impacts identified during project analysis or during public review. Some concern was expressed regarding inappropriate human behavior, noise, and so forth but the degree of concern was limited and expressed exclusively by those that live immediately around the project site.

Impacts from the project on the human environment are readily identifiable and common for this kind of project. There are no risks that are unknown or unique.

No part of the site has properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. However, in accordance with Section 106 and Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966

(as Amended), the Park and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (SHPO) indicating that although this project would occur on private land owned by PATC, all terms of Sections 106 and 110 would be observed.

In consultation with the SHPO, field reconnaissance and survey of a majority of the six-acre tract has been undertaken. No significant historical, architectural, or cultural landscape features have been identified. Although most of the surveyed area has been found to be heavily disturbed, one section has been identified that is undisturbed and is potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places for knowledge to be gained of both historic and prehistoric occupation. As per the terms of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), final site design for the project will either avoid this area leading to a finding of "no effect", or in consultation with the Virginia SHPO a plan will be developed to mitigate adverse effects on the resources.

In accordance with the MOA, once the trail locations are finalized, they will be evaluated for archeological sites. If archeological sites are identified and are determined to be significant, the Park will develop a plan for their avoidance, protection or recovery of information. All such actions will be developed in consultation with the SHPO.

No federal or state listed plant or animal species are at risk from this proposal. No critical habitat is on the site or nearby.

The preferred alternative does not threaten a violation of any Federal, state, or local environmental law. As described in the list of mitigation measures, all appropriate permits and authorizations will be sought prior to project start-up.

The preferred alternative does not establish a precedent for any future actions that may have significant effects, nor does it represent decisions about future considerations.

There are no anticipated measurable cumulative effects associated with this project. No other NPS actions are underway in the area of this project and no other parking facilities are currently being constructed or contemplated in the park.

In order to fully achieve project objectives (specifically replacement of the leased lot) and work within current land ownership constraints, this project has been presented in two phases as explained in the Introduction. This assessment and finding focuses on the first phase. Further environmental impact assessment and cumulative impact analysis will be necessary when the second phase is started.

Consideration of Impairment Under National Park Service Policy

Most actions proposed under the preferred alternative will occur on land outside of the park. As a result it could be argued that consideration of impairment to the resources and values of the National Park is unwarranted. However, those actions will occur in close proximity to the park

and some actions under the preferred alternative will occur on park land. Consideration of impairment is therefore the prudent and conservative thing to do.

The NPS has determined that implementation of the preferred alternative will not constitute an impairment to the critical resources and values of the National Park. This conclusion is based on an analysis of currently available scientific information, consideration of the environmental impacts, as described in the EA, and the professional judgement of the decision-maker. This determination has been made in accordance with NPS Management Policies (2001). The project will result in benefits to park resources and values, benefits to visitor safety and public use, and aids in the management of impacts to adjacent landowners. The preferred alternative will result in minor impacts to various park resources. Some impacts will be temporary. Some impacts will be permanent or longer-term but none will result in impairment of those resources or their values.

Rationale for the Decision

The NPS preferred alternative (Alternative D) has been chosen because it best meets the objectives and does so with fewer impacts to the human environment than other action alternatives. Even though the no-action alternative does not disturb new habitat, it does not meet the objective of replacing the leased parking lot with a permanent solution and does not meet the objective of improving public safety.

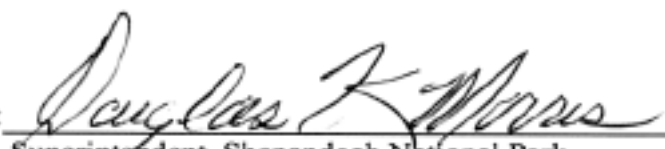
This preferred alternative is consistent with the 1986 Park General Management Plan, the general direction in the 1998 Shenandoah National Park Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan, and National Park Service Management Policies.

All environmental impacts will be minor at most and, therefore, will not result in an impairment of resources or values of Shenandoah National Park and will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

The preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Water Act, and Executive Orders 11988 (Floodplain Management) and 11990 (Protection of Wetlands).

I find that the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Recommended:


Superintendent, Shenandoah National Park

10/16/03
Date

Approved: 
Regional Director, Northeast Region

Oct 23, 2011
Date

Appendix A

Responses to Public Comment On the Environmental Assessment Old Rag Mountain Access and Parking

Introduction

In compliance with National Environmental Policy Act regulations and agency policy, the National Park Service released the Environmental Assessment for Old Rag Mountain/Weakley Hollow Access and Parking Development (EA) for public review and comment. A total of twenty written and electronic comments were received. Two of the initial comments were amended with supplemental comments. Because many of the comments were similar, the decision was made to prepare this consolidated response rather than prepare individual responses.

A number of comments were positive in nature. Some complimented the agency on the quality of the EA, others expressed appreciation for efforts aimed at resolving difficult issues related to access and parking in this area. A few individuals were unable to decide which alternative they preferred and some suggested hybrid alternatives.

Comments that questioned elements of the EA have been paraphrased and summarized below.

Responses are grouped below as both substantive and dealing with environmental concerns or procedural dealing with National Environmental Policy Act compliance.

Responses to Substantive Comments

Comment: Several comments focused on concerns related to public safety on SR600. Some felt the elimination of pedestrian traffic on the road would be an improvement. Others felt that traffic volumes would increase and therefore risks would increase. One comment suggested the need for improved traffic signs.

Response: The National Park Service believes that this project will result in improved pedestrian safety by eliminating the need for hikers to walk along a narrow, windy section of SR600. The Service will work with the Virginia Department of Transportation to evaluate the need for improved traffic signs in the area.

Comment: Parking lot operational concerns were mentioned in some instances. Included in this group are concerns over bus idling for extended periods of time resulting in reduced air quality, concerns about mismanagement of chemical toilets, the need for "no parking" enforcement on

SR600, and an expressed desire that accommodations be made to handle vehicles pulling horse trailers.

Response: The National Park Service acknowledges that these are issues that need to be handled through project design and through vigilant operation of the facility.

Comment: Several individuals expressed concern about the impact that park visitors would have on adjacent properties and the activities of adjacent landowners. Concerns included littering, noise, illegal camping, illegal campfires, trespass, vandalism, proximity to private land, and liability.

Response: Unfortunately, no alternative exists that causes no impacts to any neighbors. Alternative A (no action) causes a continuation of impacts on park neighbors at the western end of Rt. 600. The remaining alternatives bring increased vehicular traffic (but decreased pedestrian traffic) to some of the landowners situated between the existing lease lot and the PATC site. Additionally, the three landowners immediately adjacent to the PATC site may be affected by increased noise and the potential of trespass-related problems spilling over onto their properties. The adjacent landowner to the east is a project supporter. Of the four action alternatives, we believe that Alternative D provides the least impact on the two adjacent landowners to the west in that it allows for the greatest natural buffers between the construction zone and the property boundaries. We regret any potential impacts at all, but we share the belief held by many that these impacts pale in comparison to the impacts on the community that can be expected if no parking area exists at such time that the leased lot is no longer available.

Comment: A few of the comments pointed toward concerns about alternatives considered in the planning process. Three individuals felt that the current lease arrangement was not a valid solution. Others felt that it was a valid solution and that the option for a longer-term lease had not been thoroughly exhausted. Concern was also expressed about apparent failure to consider use of a shuttle bus system and purchase/lease of alternative sites.

Response: The National Park Service believes that acting responsibly to ensure that the public may visit Old Rag without severely impacting local landowners requires it to seek a solution *before* it becomes a crisis. The process of finding an appropriate site for sale, finding a partner able to acquire the property, obtaining construction financing, doing NEPA compliance, and constructing a lot may take many years. When inquired, the landowner of the leased lot responded that the land was not available for sale and did not know if the lease would be available for renewal in 2007. As described in the EA, the NPS did consider all potentially available sites in the Weakley and Berry Hollow areas. Though not addressed in the EA, the NPS also considered the possibility of acquiring a site outside of the Nethers community and shuttling hikers in by bus. This alternative was rejected based on the reasoning that: a year-round bus operation adequate to support visitation needs would be cost-prohibitive; and, without a sufficient parking area close to the trailhead, neighbors would be impacted by those visitors who reject use of a shuttle bus (a common situation in the National Park System). In 1996 the NPS

experimented with a shuttle bus operation during the summertime. Even though it only operated during peak periods, the initiative failed due to the number of people who rejected the service.

Comment: Some people expressed concern that the wetlands and surface waters on the site be protected. One comment felt that concerns related to surface waters were inadequately addressed in the EA. One comment concerned the protection of spring water used by local residents as a potable water source. One person sought an explanation of Director's Order 77 (DO-77).

Response: The National Park Service agrees that protection of these resources is important. The EA contains descriptions of the surface water environment including water quality and hydrology as well as descriptions of potential impacts from each alternative. The decision to select Alternative D, which does not involve any stream or wetland crossing and provides a 50-foot buffer between the parking lot and wetlands, was influenced heavily by the desire to protect these resources. The spring water source referred to in the comment originates well within an adjacent property and is then piped to a barrel located in the road shoulder near the edge of the PATC tract. As such water quality and flow will not be disturbed as a result of this project. Director's Orders are internal agency guidelines that explain procedural information that implements agency policy. In this case, DO-77 deals with wetland protection. This particular Director's Order does not apply because the wetlands in question are not on federal land managed by the NPS. The Corps of Engineers does, however, have jurisdiction as it relates to waters of the United States and wetlands. Consultation and permits as appropriate will be sought from the Corps.

Comment: Several comments dealt with concerns about protection of plants at the project site. One comment pointed out that Ginseng had not been listed in the Environmental Assessment as a species present at the site. Two comments addressed concern about plant dormancy and the Small Whorled Pogonia.

Response: The list of plant species provided in the EA was not intended to be exhaustive but rather representative of the species present at the site. We appreciate having the omissions pointed out. While some plants, including the Small Whorled Pogonia, may be dormant and not currently locatable, the NPS believes it is speculative and inappropriate to have decisions regarding this project hinge on the possibility that the Pogonia or some other species may be found or may appear in the future. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation has not identified any populations of rare or threatened plants from the project area. Furthermore, habitat that is conducive to the Small Whorled Pogonia is quite common within Shenandoah National Park but only one population has ever been found. The probability of this species being on this site seems to be low.

Comment: One comment suggested the desirability of adjusting the boundary of the Wilderness Area to accommodate the construction of the connector trail. Another comment dealt with a

perceived conflict between parking lot construction and allowable activities and their impacts under the Wilderness Act.

Response: Construction and maintenance of trails within designated wilderness are appropriate provided non-mechanized means are used for that construction and maintenance. No change in legislation is necessary. The tract of land that is proposed for construction of the parking lot is both outside of the park boundary and the boundary of designated wilderness. As a result, the Wilderness Act has no direct bearing on the proposed action. Indirect impacts of the proposed action on designated wilderness have been given consideration and are not anticipated to be significant. Direct impacts from construction and maintenance of a new section of trail in designated wilderness are considered appropriate and acceptable. Mitigation measures will be taken to lessen those impacts. Rerouting foot traffic from the existing trail to the new trail will not result in material impacts to wilderness values.

Comment: Several comments focused on concerns related to the numbers of parking spaces that would be available after implementation of each alternative. One comment expressed concern about the availability of the lower lot (with a capacity of 250 vehicles) and the bearing that it has on the maximum number of parking spaces available.

Response: Under alternative B, use of the leased lot would be terminated. Under alternatives C, D, and E temporary use of the leased lot would continue as overflow parking, but the size of the lot would be reduced as appropriate to maintain a total combined capacity (both the new and leased lots) of roughly 250 vehicles. The number is not precise because the leased lot is a field and has no delineated parking spaces. The number of vehicles using the leased lot may vary slightly depending on the sizes of the vehicles on a given day.

Comment: One comment suggested that the project be coordinated with the Virginia Department of Transportation and another person expressed concern that the project may stimulate the need to widen State Route 600. Another expressed concern over the potential for loss of road character.

Response: The NPS has been working in cooperation with the Virginia Department of Transportation on this problem for many years and will continue to do so. This has included a consultation on-site. Traffic volume on SR 600 is not expected to increase significantly and as such no widening of the road is anticipated.

Comment: A few comments expressed concern about the protection of cultural resources (historic structures and archeological sites).

Response: One comment called for the restoration of the “shack” that is identified on the maps in the EA. Restoration of this structure is beyond the scope of the proposed alternatives of this EA and left as a decision to be made by the property owner.

No part of the site has properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. However, in accordance with Section 106 and Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (as Amended), the Park and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (SHPO) indicating that although this project would occur on private land owned by PATC, all terms of Sections 106 and 110 would be observed.

Investigations were conducted to identify historic and cultural resources on the site. A survey and assessment of cultural resources on the site began in the winter of 2001. The survey included identification of architectural, cultural landscape, and historical components. Although several small-scale architectural features were identified, these are not considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. No significant cultural landscape features or historical or ethnographic associations were identified.

A Phase I and portions of a Phase II archaeological survey were undertaken to determine the extent of intact, undisturbed site areas. Approximately three acres of the six-acre tract were surveyed. This is where construction impacts may occur. Survey results have indicated that a majority of the surveyed area of the site has been repeatedly plowed and disturbed by other means in the past. One small area, however, has been identified as undisturbed and may potentially be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places because it may yield information important understanding historic and prehistoric occupation.

As per the terms of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), final site design for the project will either avoid this area leading to a finding of "no effect", or in consultation with the Virginia SHPO a plan will be developed to mitigate adverse effects on the resources.

In accordance with the MOA, once the trail locations are finalized, they will be evaluated for archeological sites. If archeological sites are identified and are determined to be significant, the Park will develop a plan for their avoidance, protection or recovery of information. All such actions will be developed in consultation with the SHPO.

Comment: Two comments expressed concerns about the condition of park resources on Old Rag Mountain and the impact that this project may have on those resources.

Response: These comments seem to hinge concerns on the assumption that visitor use on Old Rag will increase because parking capacity will increase as a result of this action. As explained above, no net increase in parking capacity is proposed. The National Park Service does not believe that increased use will stem from parking lot construction and therefore, resource impacts will not be indirectly increased. The National Park Service recognizes the popularity and importance of Old Rag Mountain and will remain sensitive to these concerns.

Comment: One comment called attention to the need to include information from an agency report on water quality and aquatic macroinvertebrates in the area of proposed action.

Response: The agency did consider that report in the preparation of the EA. Report content is reflected in EA language related to stream buffers and is cited in the References section of the EA.

Responses to Procedural Comments

Comment: Concerns ranged from the lack of identification of a preferred alternative in the EA, to lack of a Finding of No Significant Impact, to the need for a public hearing, to omissions of material from the EA.

Response: The preferred alternative is identified in the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). A FONSI is released after public comment is received and analyzed. It is inappropriate to include the FONSI in or with the EA prior to that review. A FONSI has now been prepared. Public hearings are not required for EAs. It is unclear why certain items were cited as missing from the EA (Memorandum of Agreement, Appendix III). These items are in the printed version of the EA. The Service acknowledges that at one point some appendix material was missing from the web version of the EA. That situation was corrected promptly.

Comment: One comment expressed concern over various terms used to characterize the intensity of impacts of the alternatives on resources.

Response: The National Park Service believes that while these terms (minimal, negligible, minor, moderate, etc.) are qualitative, they are useful in conveying the general nature of impacts and are commonly understood by the public. These terms are used by the agency to foster understanding not confusion. As explained in response to the following comment, the Service is obligated to make a final determination of resource impacts being significant or not. That determination is based on information contained in the EA including qualitative descriptions and analysis of public comments.

Comment: One comment pointed out the fact that the NPS needs to make a "determination of 'resource impact'".

Response: Determinations are not presented in environmental assessments. These are reserved until final analysis can be made after public comments are received. This determination has now been made and appears in the FONSI.

Comment: One comment discussed the opinion that information provided in the Appendix to the EA on future development ideas and concepts should have been fully considered and analyzed in the EA.

Response: Information regarding future development found in the Appendix to the EA was provided to give general context and to fully disclose thoughts of the agency. Because the current leased lot has a capacity of roughly 250 vehicles, National Park Service personnel felt it was prudent to outline possible solutions for replacing that entire capacity. None of the material is intended to be descriptive of a proposal that the agency is prepared to pursue at this time. Key issues dealing with land ownership, funding, and visitation need to be addressed in the coming years.

Appendix B

Mitigation and Monitoring

Mitigation measures are specific actions that when implemented reduce impacts, protect resources, and protect visitors. Several mitigation measures were outlined in the original EA. Those have been supplemented.

The following mitigation will be implemented as part of this decision:

Vegetation. Areas disturbed by construction activities will be revegetated with native materials. Periodic surveys will be conducted after construction to determine the presence of exotic plants. Exotics will be controlled.

Soil Resources. The maximum width of the trails will be five feet. Up to 20 erosion control features (waterbars and/or checkdams) will be installed on the trails to control run-off and erosion.

Water Resources. Measures to reduce surface water run-off will be incorporated into facility design. Up to 20 erosion control features will be installed on the trails to control run-off and erosion. Special trail design and construction techniques will be used on the connector trails where they pass through wetlands and surface waters. A 50-foot buffer between the access road/parking lot and the wetlands edge will be established in most areas. This buffer will provide protection to surface waters adjacent to the parking lot. The parking lot surface will be graded in such a fashion that stormwater runoff will be dispersed as it flows into this buffer. Erosion control and stormwater run-off mitigation measures that satisfy the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and Department of Environmental Quality best management practices will be employed.

Wetlands. A 50-foot buffer between the access road/parking lot and the wetlands edge will be established in most areas. The surface of the parking lot will be graded in such a fashion that run-off will be directed away from wetlands. Silt fences will protect wetlands in the area during construction. In the limited areas where the access road or the parking lot infringes on the 50-foot buffer, water settling and filtering structures will be installed. Special trail design and construction techniques will be used on the connector trails where they pass through wetlands and surface waters.

Wildlife and Habitat. Established guidelines in the park's bear-human conflict management plan for use of bear-proof refuse containers will be followed.

Air Quality. Design of the parking lot will include consideration for reducing the generation of fugitive dust. A speed limit of 10 mph will be established in the parking lot to reduce dust.

Cultural Resources. Additional archeological surveys will be conducted in the area of the proposed project as necessary. If previously unknown cultural resources are located during construction, the project will be halted in the discovery area until cultural resource staff can

determine the significance of the finding. The National Park Service will consult with the Virginia State Historic Preservation Officer according to 36 CFR 800.11.

Visitor Use and Recreation. Construction phasing will be coordinated with the State of Virginia and the park neighbors to minimize traffic delays on SR600. If construction activities will cause lengthy delays on SR600, those activities will be restricted to periods of low visitor use and neighbor activity. Barricades will be placed around the construction sites to prevent visitor entry.

Noise. The NPS will encourage the Department of Transportation to consider reducing the speed limit to 35 mph along the adjacent section of SR600.

Visual Resources. The proposed parking lot is the smallest of the alternatives and therefore will maximize use of vegetation onsite for visual buffering. Vegetated islands may be established in the parking lot. Previously disturbed sites will be vegetated with native materials to provide buffers.

Wilderness Resources. Trail siting will be such that woody vegetation with stems greater than 1/2" in diameter will be avoided. The trail will also follow the contours of the local terrain to reduce steepness and the potential for erosion problems. No motorized equipment will be used in the construction of that portion of the connector trail that falls within designated wilderness.

Safety. It is anticipated that most if not all of the construction site will be closed to public entry while construction is underway. To avoid conflicts with park visitors and neighbors, the following scheduling considerations will be made. Heavy construction will be scheduled either during the off-hours of visitor use or during the shoulder season to reduce hazards to visitors. Normal construction activity will be limited to daytime hours during the summer season (typically 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. seven days per week).